

CURIOUS EPITAPHS.

BY HENRY T. WILLIAMS.

Inscriptions in honor of the dead are probably as old as tombs themselves; but so little has the custom been practiced till late centuries, that it is difficult to trace the date of their commencement.

It has been disputed whether the ancient Jews, before the time of Christ, inscribed epitaphs on the monuments of the dead; but it is certain that some of very ancient date are found among them.

After the Jews came the Greeks. The Greek epitaphs were very simple, and consisted only of the name and a short character, as "a good man," "a good woman."

The Athenians put only the name of the dead with the epithet good, or hero, and a word signifying their good wishes.

The Lacedaemonians allowed epitaphs to none but those who had died in battle. Herodotus has preserved to us those which the Amphictyons caused to be inscribed on the columns which they raised in honor of the heroes of Thermopylae, and that which Simonides, from personal friendship, placed over the tomb of the prophet Megacles.

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The Greeks, instead of the inscription, sometimes engraved the instruments of the profession of the buried ones; often, also, emblems which marked their character and talents, or symbols and devices of that which they liked best.

The bas-relief thus used was very curious. Trimalchio, in Petronius, desires that the likeness of his dog (symbol of fidelity) may be formed at the feet of his statue, and the monument adorned with garlands and representations of the combats which should take place at his funeral.

Upon the monument was to be carved a snip under full sail, to show that he obtained his wealth as a merchant, in which ship he should be represented sitting, clothed in magisterial robes and insignia, pouring out riches upon the multitude; also a trichium (court with painted walls), and the people leaving therein; at his right was to be placed his fortune, with a Sicilian dove, the holding a dog with a chain; also amphora (immense vase), well secured, while one was to appear broken, and upon it a boy weeping for the misfortune. The whole was to be surrounded by a sun-dial, that the deity of the traveler, in which ship he should be represented sitting, clothed in magisterial robes and insignia, pouring out riches upon the multitude; also a trichium (court with painted walls), and the people leaving therein; at his right was to be placed his fortune, with a Sicilian dove, the holding a dog with a chain; also amphora (immense vase), well secured, while one was to appear broken, and upon it a boy weeping for the misfortune.

The Romans inscribed their epitaphs to the "manes," and frequently introduced the dead as speaking to the living. Accordingly, down to the eleventh century, all epitaphs were in the Greek or Roman language.

From the eleventh to the fifteenth, the French and Latin predominated, and in the fifteenth century those of the English language.

None exist to prove whether they were used by the Saxons or Danes before that time. The French mind is peculiarly adapted to the epigrammatic form; very felicitous examples may be quoted, as of the Count de Tena, who had enjoyed every form of temporal prosperity, and caused to be engraved on his tomb the words "Tandem Felix." "Happy at last." And also the touching epitaph to a mother, "La premiere au rendez-vous le premier au deuil."

A large portion of the earlier monuments, and consequently of the epitaphs, of the mother country, England, were destroyed at the time of the Reformation, and subsequently by the iconoclastic rage of the Puritans and Presbyterians.

But when we come down to a later date, the literature of no people, either ancient or modern, can vie with those in our language in this peculiar branch.

For, whilst English epitaphs possess the point and terseness without which no epitaph can be successful, they exhibit a feature almost unknown to those of other nations—that, viz., of wit or humor.

It seems as if the wittiest people of the world, as those who speak the English language unquestionably are, had found it impossible to confine their sallies to the living, and accordingly we find that the harmless peculiarities of the dead have often been the subject of epigrammatic wit, and a felicity which has rendered immortal what otherwise the next generation would have forgotten.

The epitaphs of modern times too often consist of fulsome comments and expressions of respect, which were never applied to the deceased while in life. Hence the English proverb, "He lies like an epitaph."

The Germans have a proverb, "He lies like a tombstone, and is as impregnable as a rock." The simplest epitaphs are, after all, the most charming, and touch the affections quickest. The column erected to the memory of General Massena, who is buried in the "Cimetiere de l'Est," in Paris, contains only the words "Massena," and simplicity is equally essential to give effect to the record of the gentle virtues of domestic life. The single word "Mother" can call a tear, when four lines of beautiful metre might fall to do so.

The following extract from an elegy on Donne, by a distinguished clergyman of England, exhibits another idea connected with the epitaph, and beautifully illustrates the character of his subject:—"that would write an epitaph for thee, And do it well, must first begin to be Such as thou wert; for none can truly know Thy worth, thy life, but he that hath lived so."

The quaint humor of Dr. Franklin has expressed itself in the following lines, his epitaph, written by himself:—"The body of BENJAMIN FRANKLIN (like the cover of an old book its contents torn out, and stripped of its stationery, his hair, food for worms, yet the work itself shall not be lost, for it will (as he believed) appear once more, and more beautiful edition corrected and amended."

The Author. One of the finest we have ever read is the simple inscription in St. Anne's church, at Cracow, dedicated by Count Sierakowski, to the illustrious Copernicus:—"Sic sol, no moventur."

The very words of Scripture, which were used as a pretext for the persecution of the great truth which he discovered, are here employed to form his epitaph. Byron's misanthropy vented itself in the epitaph on his Newfoundland dog, which he concluded with the following lines:—"To mark a friend's remains these stones arise, I never knew but one, and here he lies."

The following is said to be on the tomb of a lady who is buried in Baltimore. She was born in 1613, and died in 1738:—"Sleep, passenger, until my life you read, The time may yet be known by the record; I live times five years I lived a virgin's life, Ten times five years I was a virtuous wife, Ten times five years I lived a widow chaste, Now wretched of this world I saw my more, Between my cradle and my grave have been Eight mighty hugs-o-Scotland, and a queen, Four times five years the Commonwealth I saw, Ten times the subjects rose against the law, Twice did I see our prelate pulled down, And twice the clerk was humbled by the gown. An end of this world I saw, my more, My native country sold for English ore, Such desolation in my life have been I have a mind of all perfections full, In Saratoga, N. Y., is a tombstone containing a carved image of a locomotive, and in the window is a photograph of the engineer, to whom the monument is erected. Underneath are the following lines:—"My eye, the no gold is still, My eye, the no gold is still, The wood affords its flames no more, My days of usefulness are o'er."

If ever any epitaph expressed in highest praise the character of the departed, the succeeding lines addressed to the memory of Eliza Anspach, of Baltimore, Md., will give a beautiful illustration:—"Farewell, our best beloved; whose heavenly mind Genuis to virtue, strength to softness joined; Devotion not unblessed by pride or aife, Whose mind was sanctified and joy, more, My spirit's guide; and thine, my soul's sincere; To parents love, as to friendship dear, Unbounded respect in each I saw, my more, The tenderest daughter, sister, friend, and wife, In thee their patroness, the afflicted lost, Thy friends their comfort, ornament, and boast."

Epitaph, in Bothwell Churchyard, England, on a blacksmith:—"My sledge and hammer lie reclined, My belt too, have lost their wind, My fire's extinct, my iron decay'd, My wife is in the dust, I said, My coal is spent, my iron gone, My nails are drove, my work is done, My fire-dread corpse lies here at rest, My soul, smother'd, lies in the dust, My soul, smother'd, lies in the dust, My soul, smother'd, lies in the dust."

There is a singular inscription in Enfield Churchyard, England, on the tomb of John White, who was surveyor to the New River Company:—"Here lies John White, who day by day On river works did use much clay, Whom many a time, but never lost, He would not die, yet that will come, Which to reserve takes little room, Although included in this great tomb, Epitaph in the great tomb."

Epitaph in the great tomb:—"Here lies Tom Shorthose, Sue tomb, shee sleep, shee riches; Qui vivit sine ulla, sine cloak, Sine shirt, sine breeches."

Epitaph in a churchyard near Salisbury, England:—"On Richard Button, Esq. "Oh! Sun, Moon, stars, and ye celestial Powers, Are graves they awarded him Buton Hoies?" "Which is the object, the longest, the broadest, and the smallest grave in this churchyard?" said a pedestrian to his companion, while meditating among the tombs at Esher. "Why," replied he, "it is that in which Miles Buton is buried; for it is Miles below the sod, Miles in length, Miles in breadth, and yet after all it is but a Button Hole."

About the year 1815, an account of a Kentish miller's funeral was given in the papers. He had been a legatee of a fortune, on condition that he should bury him under the mill, and place the following epitaph, his own composition, above him:—"Underneath this ancient mill Lies the body of poor Will, On the 14th of the month of May, And as a funeral nobody cried, And his grave, and how he fares, Nobody knows, and nobody cares."

Epitaph in Baltimore, Md.:—"In memory of Peter Lattig, born Dec. 1764, died April 3, 1799. "Peter Lattig was his name, Heav'n I hope his station, His name was his reward, place, And Christ is his salvation. Now he is dead and buried, And all his bones are rotten, His monument, when you shall see, Let it be forgotten."

Perhaps the culmination of the comic, absurd, and ridiculous in epitaphs was never reached, or so fully illustrated, as in these few following specimens, actually copied from tombstones in a churchyard in Massachusetts:—"Ezra Green, Deceased, aged forty-seven, A miser and a hypocrite, never went to heaven." In the same yard:—"This is the tomb of Ellen Hill, A woman who would always have her will, She snubbed her husband, though she made good And on the whole he's rather glad she's dead. She whipped her children (and she drank her gin) Whipped virtuous out, and whipped the devil in, May such a woman's name be forgotten, Where they throng all eternity can soild."

Another:—"To the memory of Mary Gold, Who was sold to nursing by her name, She was a terrible woman for an acquaintance, But O. H. himself couldn't live with her. Her temper was furious, Her tongue was venetian, She resented a look, and frowned at a smile, And was as sour as vinegar, She punished the earth with words of forty years, To say nothing of her relations."

Another:—"To the memory of Captain Barber, a staunch patriot who fought and bled for his country, who was foremost in all the brave deeds of his nation's history. Known to be a liberal man! but he was a glutton and a wine bibber! drove his only son to sea, and to ruin; killed his wife by his misdeeds, and died drunk in his 45th year. Here is a genuine epitaph, although the precise locality cannot at present be recalled:—"Here lies John Trollop, Who's name did roll up, Who's God called his soul up, His body allied this bone up."

In Pomfret, Connecticut:—"I here bid ye to my World adieu, My dear friends, and so must you."

In New Britain, Connecticut:—"Now I am dead and out of Mud Upon this stone My name you'll find, And when my name you plainly see, A son can be his father's foe."

In Sleep, New York:—"Sleep on, sleep on my love, Sleep on my love for you are my true love, My dear wife and children don't you mourn for me, Heaven is my home and earth is my footstool."

In Pittfield, Massachusetts:—"When you're passing by, And thinking, my you're where I lie, Remember you're four must have, Like me, a man on the grave, And 3' sons, 2 sons and a daughter."

In Middlebury, Vermont:—"White Chrystal drops impart the lawn, A Tear shall drop o'er Betsy's urn." In Old Sekonk, Massachusetts:—"My body is not to be found by this stone For God hath decreed it a watery tomb But since in the act of all men to do It is my sad fate in the ocean to be, Captain James Faine, 1816. Dec. 14. Age 32." In Milford, Connecticut:—"Molly, the pleasant in her day, Was suddenly seized and sent away, How soon she's ripe, how soon she's rotten, Laid in the grave, and soon forgotten."—N. Y. Independent.

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INSURANCE COMPANIES. STATEMENT OF THE CONDITION OF THE MASSACHUSETTS MUTUAL LIFE Insurance Company, ON THE FIRST OF JANUARY, 1866.

Table with columns: FIRST, SECOND—THE PROPERTY OF ASSETS HELD BY THE COMPANY. Assets include Capital Stock, Surplus, and various bonds and securities.

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